

Oakland's NHL team was awful

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By Susan Fornoff
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MEMORIES OF a long-lost hockey team. You could never be sure what to call them, and you didn't know what they would be wearing.

The California Seals, in green, blue and white. The Seals, in green and gold uniforms and white skates. The California Golden Seals, in "Pacific blue" and "California gold."

It was no wonder, though, that the National Hockey League's first California franchise underwent an occasional identity crisis. From the beginning, you couldn't even be sure of where they would be playing.

The Seals' original owner, Barry Van Gerbig, tried to move the club two months after he bought it in 1967.

Next stop, Denver ... Seattle ... Cleveland?

"The team was being moved constantly," recalls Len Shapiro, the Seals' public relations director.

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"The fans said, 'Why should we get involved? Why should we put anything up when the team could be gone the next day?'"

And, one May day in 1976, the team was gone. The Seals were young and improving. Their fans were enthusiastic and multiplying.

The owner, though, was frustrated and moving.

The first stop was Cleveland, where the Barons played two seasons. Then the franchise went to

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Minneapolis, merging with the North Stars. Then, through a unique transfer in sports history, part of the North Stars' organization came to California.

The circle is complete. The same George Gund who urged Mel Swig to take the Seals to Cleveland 15 years ago had brought "them" back to California.

Shapiro calls the San Jose Sharks a "kissing cousin" of the Seals, but it seems more like an ancient ancestor. Only TV announcer Joe Starkey links the Sharks to Northern California's NHL past.

But something must be said for bloodlines, especially when your team is called the Sharks. So, here, for the sake of nostalgia and the family tree, follows one last look at the NHL's last representative in Northern California, the 1975-76 California Golden Seals.

THE HISTORIAN — "I revel in the fact that my last year's advertising budget, for everything, was \$5,000."

Len Shapiro directed the Seals' media relations efforts in their last two seasons. The team was in debt from the day Van Gerbig was awarded the franchise, to the day in 1970 that Charlie Finley bought in, to the day in 1973 that the NHL had to operate without an owner, to the day it left town.

Shapiro loves hockey, and he keeps the books and the stories on the Seals. Some of the best from his scrapbook and memory:

■ The Seals made the worst trade in NHL history, sending the rights to future Hall of Famer Guy Lafleur to Montreal in 1970 for forward Ernie Hicke and the rights to negotiate with Fred Glover, the coach.

"They never had that big, big star they could have had in Lafleur," says John Porter, who covered that Seals team for the Oakland Tribune. "Right from the get-go, they were trading draft picks for marginal players."

■ Finley had his version of the Seals wearing "wedding gown white" skates.

"After every game, the trainers would have to repaint them because of the pucks and sticks hitting them," goaltender Gilles Meloche said. "By the end of the season, there was a big crust of paint on each skate. They must have weighed 15 pounds each."

■ And there was a night in St. Louis where the team played a terrible first period. Trudging off the ice into the locker room, they heard the public address announcer declare, "Shots on goal: the Blues 20 and the Golden Seals 1!" In the locker room, forward Stan Gilbertson shouted, "OK, who was the wise guy who got the shot?"

"All true," Shapiro claims.

THE OWNER — Mel Swig has his Sharks season tickets. The San Francisco developer, best known for running the family's Fairmont hotels, played hockey at Brown University and is happy to have the chance to watch it again.

If you want to know why the Seals didn't succeed, Swig is the man to talk to. He had owned the minor-league franchise in Oakland and wanted to own the NHL franchise but was rejected. He says Van Gerbig "had his friends in the league." It is Swig's way of saying that not naming him as owner was the NHL's first step to failure; he bought the team only after the NHL had to take over for Finley.

Then, the area's inability to commit to build a new arena doomed the club. The Seals averaged a franchise-high 6,944 in their final season, but that average probably could have been higher if the Seals could have packed more people in the arena for the star draws such as Bobby

learned of the imminent move to Cleveland. The players and front office didn't find out until weeks after the season ended with a 5-2 victory over the Los Angeles Kings before a crowd of 6,442.

The team finished 27-42-11, with 65 points. That was last in the Adams Division but better than four other NHL teams.

"My gut feeling is that the team will stay here," general manager Bill McCreary was saying on that last day of the season.

THE STAR — "I want to buy a house here," Dennis Maruk was saying on that last day.

Maruk wasn't the leading scorer on the team, but he's the player people remember when they talk about the 1975-76 season. He was just 19 years old, a second-round draft pick who didn't play minor-league hockey.

"Of course, it was not one of the stronger teams," Maruk remembers by telephone from Minnesota. "I felt if I went to training camp and played hard, I'd have a chance to make the team."

He did and embarked on a 14-year career.

"I remember my first goal and some other big moments that year, but most outstanding was a game we lost in Montreal 1-0," he says. "(NHL president) Clarence Campbell came in after the game and said, 'What a great game!' That was an honor for me."

Maruk had been working in sales and marketing for the North Stars after his retirement last year, but he left when the new management took over. He wants to get back into hockey and says, "I would love to be able to get out there where I started."

THE ANNOUNCER — Joe Starkey, bank vice-president, used to sit in the stands at the Forum in Inglewood, tape-recording his make-believe play-by-play. When his bank transferred him to the Bay Area, he adopted the Seals as the team for which he "broadcasted."

One day in 1972, he visited Finley in Chicago. Starkey walked out of Finley's office with the Seals' radio job.

"He hired me mainly because I told him I'd work cheap," Starkey says.

When the Sharks open tonight in Vancouver, he'll be back on the air — TV this time — exclaiming once again, "What a bonanza!"

Says Starkey: "One thing I face here is too much nostalgia. I've been away from hockey for 10 years now, but the fans here still associate hockey with me. We'll have to see how it goes over when they hear it again. It's so old. The players are gone, and you're comparing apples and oranges as far as the way the organizations run."

Starkey is here, though. And the ancestry remains undeniable.

"The building (the Oakland Coliseum Arena) was too small," Swig says. "It only seated 12,000 people at that time. And I thought it should have been in San Francisco. So I tried very hard to get the city to build a new building. I had it financed at the time, but Mr. (George) Moscone, who was mayor at that time, kind of double-crossed me a little bit. He said he was going to do some things, and then he did the opposite. And the building never got off the ground."

That arena was going to cost about \$25 million. San Jose is spending more than \$100 million on the Sharks' permanent home.

As for the land on which Swig wanted to build, known as the "Yerba Buena project," it is now part of the Moscone Center.

THE COACH — Jack Evans was a throwback, a defense-minded coach who wouldn't put up with any frivolity or, no doubt, white skates. He had played for Chicago's Stanley Cup championship team in 1960-61 and coached Salt Lake City to the Central Hockey League championship in 1975.

So he was in line to coach the Seals that fall.

"The franchise wasn't shaky — it was up for sale," he remembers. "Then Swig and Gund came on the scene. The year I got there, they were coming off a very bad year, but the crowds picked up and we picked up."

"Then all of the problems set in about folding."

During the season, Evans said he never felt the effects of operating on a shoestring. The paychecks showed up on time — the way they wouldn't in Cleveland — and the team didn't travel by mule train or sleep in tents.

"The organization had made some mistakes," he says. "But we had a good nucleus of veterans, and we surprised a lot of people. I remember one game in particular, the Canadiens were flying high. They came in, and we outshot them 20-1 in the first period."

"Unfortunately, they were ahead 1-0 at the end of the period, and they beat us 2-1."

A few games before the season ended, Evans said, he

Sharks feed on Seal pups

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Former Bay hockey
fans boosting team

By David K. Li
STAFF WRITER

Before the San Jose Sharks came into existence three years ago, Northern California's NHL past could be summed up in two words — mediocre and brief.

The Oakland-based California Golden Seals were part of the NHL's western expansion in 1967 and enjoyed limited success before fleeing for — of all places — Cleveland in 1976.

While the Seals never established a fan base like the Sharks have done in San Jose, Oakland's failed hockey venture left a surprising residue of support that's bloomed into today's fever of teal.

Team studies show that 10 percent of Sharks ticket-buyers fall into the "Seal pups" classification, children of former California Golden Seals fans.

"These are children who went to games with their parents, remember the excitement of hockey and then had a 15-year gap to fill," said Sharks Vice President Matt Levine, the team's marketing head. "Now they're in their 30s and, as adults, can buy their own tickets and relive a part of their childhood."

In between the Seals' departure and the Sharks' birth, a strange twist of hockey ancestry linked Oakland, Cleveland, Minneapolis and San Jose — all presided over by current Sharks owner George Gund.

After the Seals left (with Gund as the part-owner) for Ohio, the renamed Cleveland Barons merged in 1978 with the Minnesota North Stars in a desperate attempt to survive. George and brother Gordon Gund assumed control of the Minnesota franchise, and sold the team in exchange for expansion rights in San Jose.

That expansion deal allowed San Jose to draft North Stars' players to fill its roster, completing the incestuous Bay Area-Midwest connection.

Coliseum Commission President George Vukasin said he tried — unsuccessfully — to lure the Sharks to Oakland. But both Sharks officials and Warriors President Dan Finnane wanted to be the primary tenants or landlords of their own buildings, he said.

San Jose's agreement with the Sharks gives them virtually complete control of the arena.

Vukasin credited Sharks management for successfully bringing hockey fever back to Northern California — even if it is all the way down in San Jose.